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BOOK REVIEW

MANHUNT

By Peter Maas.
301 pp. New York: Random House. $17.95.

By Thomas Powers

ONE of Edwin P. Wilson's last acts as a free man, on a plane from the Dominican Republic carrying him to certain arrest in New York in June 1982, was to tear up a handwritten account of his assets and liabilities after 27 years working for the C.I.A., the Navy and himself in what might loosely be called the world of intelligence. An alert United States marshal on the plane recovered the list. From one point of view, you could say Mr. Wilson had done all right: his net worth was roughly $14 million. On the other hand, when the prosecutors were done with him he was in solitary confinement in a tough Federal prison, serving sentences totaling 52 years with no better than an outside chance of parole somewhere around the year 2000, when he would be 72.

This was justice of a sort, perhaps, but a very approximate sort. Mr. Wilson's partners, hirelings, allies and cronies in a bewildering tangle of schemes to sell a wide variety of illegal military equipment to Libya for the most part got off — with light sentences or probation in some cases, altogether in others. In truth, our notion of "justice" takes something of a beating in "Manhunt," Peter Maas's compelling account of the Wilson case. So do "intelligence" and "national security" — abstract nouns freely used to cloak a multitude of venal sins in a Washington you won't find described, or even hinted at, in high school textbooks on civics. To me, it sounds a good deal like Rome after the death of the republic. Money and empire — global responsibilities, if you prefer — go hand in hand. Mr. Wilson saw a lot of money passing back and forth and decided to grab a little for himself. He got caught. It's an old story, and Mr. Maas tells it well, with a fine eye for character and setting and a good reporter's tenacity in finding out things a whole lot of people don't want him to know. A book of this sort offers ample opportunity for moralizing. Mr. Maas wisely lets it go. But along with his conventional tale of crime and punishment, Mr. Maas has also given us a brutal portrait of what easy money can do to the men who make a profession of defense.

Edwin Wilson was the son of a dirt-poor Idaho farmer, according to what Mr. Wilson told Mr. Maas in their only interview. The father had his neighbors' respect, as Mr. Wilson discovered after his death, but by then the son had built his life around a different goal — money and the things it could buy. It was slow going at first. Odd jobs got him through college. Three years as an officer in the Marines ended in discharge with a knee injury. A chance encounter led to the Central Intelligence Agency in 1955 with a starting salary of $3,670 a year.

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Mr. Maas's account of Mr. Wilson's first decade in the agency is sketchy but intriguing. As a security officer, for example, Mr. Wilson once found himself listening to Vice President Nixon while tapping the phone of a Newsweek reporter. One would like to know a little more about that. Later, as a labor specialist with the C.I.A.'s international organizations division in 1964, Mr. Wilson worked for a time as an advance man for Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, then running for Vice President. It is hard to square these two tasks with the C.I.A.'s mandate to pursue foreign intelligence.

After the election, he asked a Humphrey campaign official to help him set up his own international shipping company — which was actually a C.I.A. "proprietary" called Maritime Consulting Associates. Now, at last, Mr. Wilson's career began to take off, and his fortune to grow. A proprietary is a company wholly but secretly owned by the C.I.A. According to Mr. Maas, Mr. Wilson's company shipped everything everywhere — even disassembled boats to central Africa, where they were welded together on the shores of Lake Tanganyika and used to intercept Soviet arms being ferried across the lake to rebels in the Congo. (An old C.I.A. hand once told me that, for him, the height of the cold war came one misty morning when C.I.A. Cubans in our boats had a shoot-out with President Fidel Castro's Cubans in their boats in the heart of Africa.) Other Wilson cargoes included arms to Angola; crowd-control gear to Chile, Brazil and Venezuela; all kinds of equipment for intelligence-gathering facilities in Iran; supplies for a group of dissident army officers planning a coup in Indonesia. Here again one would like to know more. A C.I.A.-backed coup in Indonesia failed in 1958, before Mr. Wilson entered the shipping business. A second, successful coup occurred in 1965, but that one ended in a massacre of the Chinese community, and the C.I.A. has always denied involvement. Is Mr. Maas offering evidence the agency was lying? We are not told.

At one time or another the C.I.A. has run hundreds of proprietaries around the world — airlines, executive-recruitment firms, companies chartering ships and aircraft, printing companies, newspapers and book publishers, advertising agencies and the like. They are not intended to make a profit but sometimes do. Apparently Mr. Wilson's did. In any event, large sums of money routinely pass through the hands of these firms, and accounting for money for "expenses" is hard to control. Mr. Wilson did all right. By 1970 he was worth $200,000. The following year he lost his job in a bout of budget cutting at the C.I.A., but he went ahead anyway with the purchase of a substantial estate, Mount Airy Farms, in the posh horse country of Virginia. The price was $342,000. Like the provincial governors, tax farmers and army contractors who made fortunes in imperial Rome, Mr. Wilson dreamed of owning land, not working it. Eventually he put together a showplace of more than 2,300 acres.

Of course it never cleared a nickel, but it helped Mr. Wilson impress powerful acquaintances — men like the C.I.A.'s Theodore Shackley, a friend of Mr. Wilson who, according to Mr. Maas, was once a morning-line favorite to be the Director of Central Intelligence if President Ford had been elected in 1976. Mr. Maas makes it clear that just having Mr. Shackley for a friend helped Mr. Wilson. Another C.I.A. buddy, Thomas Clines, who had once been his case officer, helped steer Mr. Wilson to his next job with the Navy's Task Force 157, a supersecret and freewheeling outfit that monitored Russian naval activity. Mr. Wilson knew how to set up proprietaries and the Navy didn't. It was a perfect match. In one typical project the Navy asked Mr. Wilson to provide a "civilian" ship to keep tabs on Soviet nuclear capabilities in the Indian Ocean. Mr. Wilson delivered a trawler crammed with electronic gear and billed the Task Force for $500,000. His case officer asked him to itemize the bill. Mr. Wilson was happy to oblige. The new bill had two lines — $250,000 for "product" and $250,000 for "service."

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